

Aleister Crowley, Marie de Miramar & the True Wanga

ALEISTER CROWLEY'S SURVIVING PAPERS are kept together in the Warburg Institute in London, collected and donated by Gerald Yorke. Many remain largely unexamined. While doing research there I came upon an overlooked document, buried among other pamphlets, that opens up a strand of enquiry touching upon both Crowley's relationship with Afro-Caribbean voodoo and the text of his *Book of the Law*.

Bound together in a volume with six Theosophical pamphlets there lies a curious late nineteenth-century booklet. Its full title is *Obeah Simplified: The True Wanga! What It Really Is, and How It Is Done: A Scientific but Plain Treatise from a Popular Point of View, and Divested as Far as Possible of all Technical Terms*. Eighty pages long and undated, like the others it is bound with, it is heavily annotated and underlined, in part by Yorke.

Crowley's *Book of the Law*, dated to 1904 and central to his philosophy of Thelema, contains this line: 'Also the mantras and spells; the obeah and the wanga; the work of the wand and the work of the sword; these he shall learn and teach.'¹ The juxtaposition of obeah and wanga is unusual, striking enough to warrant further exploration.

Obeah Simplified is a curious document. It was

purportedly written by a Caribbean native, probably someone from Trinidad or Tobago, given the publisher's Port-of-Spain address and the numerous local references. The estimated date of publication is 1890–5. The author is 'Prof. Dr. Myal Djumboh Cassecanarie', possessor of an impressive list of titles: 'Sc. U.D., &c, Chevalier de l'Ordre du Vodun Saint des Egbas, Prof. Of Pneumatics in the T'changa Wanga University, Consulting Quimboiseur to H.E. the Ex-President of Haïti, Member of the Principal West Africa and West Indian Scientific Societies, &c, &c, &c'. The author's name is clearly a pseudonym: 'Myal' is the Jamaican term for an African-derived religious ceremony, 'Djumboh' alludes to a Caribbean term for spirits or ghosts, 'Cassecanarie' is the name of the Haitian Vodou festival Casse Canarie.

The author's titles involve more than one tradition. 'Chevalier de l'Ordre du Vodun des Egbas' suggests a connection to both Haitian Vodou and the West African Egba ethnic group; 'Consulting Quimboiseur' alludes to the Quimbois tradition of Martinique and Guadeloupe.² Such title jumbles are typical of nineteenth-century European writers on the subject. Moreover, European or American commentaries are the only written ones known from this period. But more on the authorship will come later.

The author of the booklet is well informed. He is at pains to distinguish the obeah of Jamaica and

Fig. 1. Aleister Crowley and Marie de Miramar, c.1929.
WARBURG INSTITUTE, LONDON.

Trinidad from Haitian Vodou:

The Obeah (meaning killing) or Wanga (meaning (a) an incantation or spell and (b) a mysterious or poisonous drug) cult, is the name of the tribal system of single magic of the Popo, Koromantyn, Eboe and other tribes. The Voudou or T'changa cult is the dual magical system of the Arada, Yuruba, and Dahoman tribes. All functions of T'changa are dual, i.e. can only be effectively performed by a Priest ('Papaloi') and Priestess ('Mamaloï') together, and in presence of the Sacred Snake, the totem or Fetish of the sect.³

As well as showing considerable knowledge and an ability to distinguish traditions of the region, *Obeah Simplified* is quite different from other contemporary works on voodoo and obeah, which paint these practices as either primitive superstition or sinister black magic. Hesketh Bell's 1889 book *Obeah: Witchcraft in the West Indies* is typical: 'you can hardly realize the depth and extent of their superstition, or their unreasoning belief and dread of anything coming under the head of what they call "Obeah" or "Wanga"'.⁴

Cassecanarie, in contrast, disapproves of the laws outlawing obeah, widespread in the Caribbean, and adopts a tone of respect for the tradition: 'a word on the benefits and propriety of bringing it before the Public at this juncture may not be amiss . . . it is quite time that attention should be freshly called in a popular manner to the higher and more recondite branches of study'. He asserts that the study of obeah/wanga is of great importance: 'While the minds of the rising generation are being imbued with beautiful and salubrious Politico-Social instruction, it should not be forgotten that all such studies are valueless to young persons who are not previously well grounded in Wanga'.⁵

The author spends much of the booklet outlining how obeah magic is performed in various situations. We learn of the protecting or 'dressing' of the crop fields. The obeah man or woman can, like Moses, change a staff into a snake, and these snakes are then

put to work to protect the crops from thieves. Obeah is also used to arouse 'Love' and enforce fidelity in a person through forming a 'psychic rapport' using hair, sweat or blood and then involving unspecified vegetable drugs.

The peculiarly named 'Dirty Clothes Oracle' is described at some length. It is performed when it is suspected that a person's death has been caused by means of obeah, or when a newly deceased person has left money in an unknown place:

the relatives and friends of the deceased assemble in the house, and procuring a board about five or six feet long, appoint four relatives of the deceased to carry it on their heads. On the board is placed a bundle of the yet unwashed garments the deceased died in. This being done, the board bearers are directed to march with it round the house, against the sun, and then come in. Then, if the necessary power is present, it manifests itself by the bearers being unable to speak, and reeling about with the board on their heads as if intoxicated. Then questions are addressed to the board by the name of the deceased, which are answered by it – through its bearers – bowing with it towards the questioner; or, by the board and its bearers hunting out any person or thing like a thought reader.

If the oracle shows death by magic, the obeah practitioner is given some items of the deceased's unwashed clothing and he uses them to 'cause the Jumbi of the deceased, to haunt, frighten, drive mad, or kill the person it is "set" upon'.⁶

Cassecanarie repeatedly insists the power of obeah lies in utterance, rather than in fetish objects, animal sacrifice or poison. Thus, in his account of the Bella-bella or Jumbi dance, a spirit-possession ritual, the participants' singing of a ballad with 'a particular set of words used only on such occasions' is italicised to emphasise its importance.⁷

Obeah Simplified is not the first work to use the term 'wanga'. Hesketh Bell's book was published in 1889, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites

appearances from 1882 and 1851. Cassecanarie, however, is almost alone in portraying wanga as both an incantation or spell and a mysterious or poisonous drug rather than solely as a drug. The only other instance where 'wanga' is defined as utterance is Spenser St John's 1884 book *Hayti, or the Black Republic*, where he reports a lady being found 'going through certain incantations called wanga'.⁸

Cassecanarie's view stresses its effectiveness, relating first- and second-hand accounts of its power. We learn of Obeahman Peter Barrat, whose nose had been eaten away by disease. When mocked by two girls for his disfigurement, he responded by 'passing his open hand down the faces of each one, declaring as he did so that within three months they would be as noseless as he was'. Cassecanarie then tells us, 'This duly came to pass, and one of the women who died recently, was once pointed out to me in confirmation.'⁹ He is at pains to make it clear that Barrat's verbal declaration was an essential component of this malefic spell.

He retells a story of a young West African boy who responded to complaints of dry weather. The boy 'gathered three oranges, which he placed on the ground at a little distance from one another. He then prostrated himself with a surprising fervency and devotion. He then gathered three little orange twigs which, after repeated prostrations, he placed against each orange. He then prostrated himself for the third time, and said some words with much respect and attention.' Rain commenced. Cassecanarie italicises the boy's use of spoken words.¹⁰

Anti-Christianity and Authorship of *Obeah Simplified*

Obeah Simplified's antipathy towards Christianity, or at least towards Christians, is a noticeable feature of the text. The respectful treatment of non-European religio-magical traditions and the hostility towards bigoted Christianity would certainly have been welcome reading for a young Crowley.

Cassecanarie compares accounts of obeah magic

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to accounts of biblical miracles. 'The vulgar, who call, and pretend to think Obeah a mere superstition, will find in this *quelque chose à penser!* They did not see the classic feats of the Egyptian priest magicians, and their Jewish opponents – turning rods &c., into serpents . . . but they have a solid belief in them; and so, they will deride the very possibility of such feats at the hands of an Obeahman'.¹¹

He lambasts the missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat's attempts to Christianise Caribbean black slaves. Labat had described finding an obeah man attending to a sick female slave inside her hut, praying to a clay effigy on a makeshift altar; the Dominican subjected

Fig. 2. Cover of Myal Djumboh Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified: The True Wanga!*, no date. TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT.

the obeah man to 300 lashes of the whip, and converted the woman to Christianity. Cassecanarie sarcastically writes, 'seeing the unfortunate woman die a good Christian; which being translated, means, that he didn't think she suffered sufficiently from her bodily sickness, so he took care to add to it the most awful mental agony he could devise and inflict!'.¹²

The anti-Christian tone, in the 1890s, points to Cassecanarie as a follower of Theosophy. The movement's Eastern-derived teachings on such things as reincarnation, and its emphasis on personal revelation, set it apart from the conventional Christianity of the day. As mentioned before, Crowley's copy of *Obeah Simplified* is bound together with various other pamphlets, all of Theosophist provenance.

A closer look into Theosophical archives reveals that virtually the same text as *Obeah Simplified* was published serially in *The Theosophist* journal in 1891. There the author is not given as Cassecanarie but rather as Miad Hoyora Kora-Hon and close variant spellings. Appended initials F.T.S. indicate he was a Fellow of the Theosophical Society. He was a regular contributor to *The Theosophist* in the years 1884–7, with such articles as 'Mystic Lore – Shamanism & Witchcraft amongst the Kolarian Tribes', 'Occultism in Modern Literature', 'Alchemy in Dublin in 1792' and numerous book reviews. This is clearly a committed Theosophist.

Between 1887 and 1891 there are no articles by Miad Hoyora, then in 1891 the obeah articles appear. The author refers to 'my residence of almost five years in the West Indies', which surely explains the preceding years of silence. He also writes of 'the great unwillingness of the negro to open to a white man on the subject [of obeah]' – this is a non-native of the Caribbean. He writes of 'my land', 'my servants' and 'my European friends'.¹³ He is educated and middle-class; the reference to 'my European friends' may suggest he was of Indian origin. Many Theosophists were, and Trinidad and Tobago also had sizeable Indian migrant-descent populations, so our author may have had relatives there.

Obeah Simplified and *Liber AL*

Returning to the copy of *Obeah Simplified* in the Yorke Collection, we can turn to the question of whether Crowley owned, read and annotated this work. It is not surprising for him to have owned Theosophical booklets. While not a member of the Theosophical Society, Crowley knew the movement and its work, and admired its founder, Madame Blavatsky.

To consider whether Crowley read and annotated these actual copies, a bit of background on the Yorke Collection is necessary. Many but not all the works in the collection are Crowley's own copies, which Gerald Yorke tracked down and acquired. Some are copies into which Yorke transcribed Crowley's abundant annotations and underlinings for the benefit of a fellow enthusiast.¹⁴ Thus the collection's copy of *Obeah Simplified* may have been owned by Crowley and marked by him, or it may be a copy owned by Yorke, with annotations of his own or copying Crowley's.

But it does look as though this is a copy Crowley actually owned, read and marked up. In it, two sets of handwriting have made annotations. One is Yorke's small, neat script, easily identifiable. The second is a larger hand that resembles Crowley's. On the title page Yorke has written, 'underlining not by me G Yorke', referring to pencil-underlined passages throughout the booklet. At the top of the page, in the larger handwriting (Crowley's?) are two jottings: 'element language p.24' and 'the Word Spell'.

When we turn to page 24, as indicated, we find the following paragraph, with an underlined phrase:

The ancient 'Spellar-Art' we know has special secret *formulae* for every purpose under the sun, from snake charming upwards. The Norse 'Troll-Runes' from what is now known of them were a similar system. The spells and incantations of the European Witches, etc., was another; and the 'Foreign-Language' speeches and chants of the Hametic Obeahmen correspond. *All these formulae whenever or wherever used, are in the*

same, the Universal, 'element language' . . . As students well know, that language is composed of 'sounds, not words,' &c., and so the reason of Obeah spells forever being said in a foreign language, is not far to seek.

If it is feasible that the underlinings are Crowley's, and this paragraph captured his attention, then it becomes distinctly likely when we consider that we find this same idea in *Magick in Theory and Practice*. 'It is found by experience (confirming the statement of Zoroaster) that the most potent conjurations are those in an ancient and perhaps forgotten language, or even those couched in a corrupt and possibly always meaningless jargon.'¹⁵

The 'Word Spell' note on the title page directs the reader to the final pages of *Obeah Simplified*. This is the passage of interest to the annotator:

the main 'power' utilized in the Art treated of, is the Spell, as is fully indicated by the name Obeah-Wanga. Still, the word Obeah is by itself also sufficiently indicative of all the other processes referred to, such as the 'Dirty Clothes Oracle,' the use of Glamour, &c., while in other instances which look fairly complete without it, the spell though not mentioned is *the* thing necessary for their effectiveness.

People who are unlearned in such subjects when they hear the words 'Spell' and 'Charm' immediately remember hearing of them in Fairy tales, and are not disposed to think of any more consequence. But, when they are reminded that the creation of the world is ascribed in Genesis to the 'word' of God, the power of the *Logos*, perhaps they will be inclined to view the word 'Spell' in another light. Others who are Freemasons have heard of a 'Lost Word', which is universally desired by all Masons to reanimate the body they know of, which 'is not dead but sleepeth.' That 'Lost Word' is a 'Spell', and the Spell or Charm is a formula of sounds arranged to produce certain vibrations in co-relation with certain chords; the utilization of the natural magical power of sound energized by

the Concentrated Will. A Spell or Charm is by no means dependent for its effect on being couched in any particular words, it is a sound formula, which can be as well – and sometimes better – played on an instrument, than spoken.¹⁶

The passage is redolent of Crowley's subsequent ideas concerning the science of magic, and the penultimate sentence sounds especially Thelemic with its reference to the 'concentrated will'. In his commentaries on *The Book of the Law* Crowley was to write, 'Magick ceremonies proper are merely organized and concentrated attempts to impose our Will on certain parts of the Cosmos.'¹⁷ It seems hardly a coincidence that this comment appends line 37, the very line containing the phrase 'the obeah and the wanga'. Crowley evidently thought this passage important enough to include among the introductory epigrams to *Magick in Theory and Practice*, where it appears alongside quotations from Pythagoras, the *Goetia* of the *Lemegeton of King Solomon*, Frazer's *Golden Bough* and 1 Thessalonians.¹⁸

Crowley wrote that line 37 indicates that 'An entirely new system of magic is to be learnt and taught, as is now being done.'¹⁹ His New Comment expands on what this new system is, namely working with spoken word:

Mantras may be defined as sentences proper to concentration of the mind by virtue of their constant repetition . . .

Spells are methods of communicating the will to other beings . . .

The Obeah is the magick of the Secret Light with special reference to acts; the wanga is the verbal or mental correspondence of the same . . .

For the root OB (AVB = 9), see Appendix; it may be connected with the word 'Obey'.

The 'obeah' being the acts, and the 'wanga' the words, proper to Magick, the two cover the whole world of external expression.

...

Now one more point about the obeah and the wanga, the deed and the word of Magick.

Magick is the art of causing change in existing phenomena. This definition includes raising the dead, bewitching cattle, making rain, acquiring goods, fascinating judges, and all the rest of the programme.²⁰

Crowley gives here his own understanding of these two terms, 'obeah' and 'wanga'. 'Obeah' is equated with deeds or actions, while 'wanga' signifies spells in the sense of verbal utterances. This is exactly the position of *Obeah Simplified*.

From all the above points I cautiously suggest that the pamphlet *Obeah Simplified* was an inspiration to Crowley. Published in the 1890s, when the young man was still developing his own magical world view, it shaped some of his outlook on utterance and spells and reinforced his respect for non-European magical traditions. This means, of course, that it would be a source for *The Book of the Law*. The spirit Aiwass, who Crowley always said dictated it to him, may perhaps be regarded as a separate entity, but one that was a manifestation of Crowley's unconscious.

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New Orleans Voodoo, 1916–17

Despite his interest in 'the obeah and the wanga' before and around 1909, and indeed in later years when writing his commentaries, Crowley does not appear to have sought to learn more of voodoo when he had the chance in late 1916. During the First World War he was based in the USA and travelled around the country, including a stay in New Orleans from December 1916 to February 1917. He stayed near the red-light district, which he found especially appealing. Known as 'the District', and latterly as Storyville, it was home not only to prostitutes but also to gamblers, jazz musicians and others on the periphery of respectable society. It was also the centre of voodoo and hoodoo. Famed 'voodoo women' including Fanny Sweet, Marie Laveau, Julia Jackson and Eulalie Echo had lived and worked there, and voodoo and hoodoo was the neighbourhood's dominant belief system, at least according to one scholar. Adjacent to Storyville are Congo Square, site of former public voodoo-based dances, and the Tremé district, home to Mardi Gras Indians and the African Spiritual Churches, which kept alive some voodoo traditions.²¹

All of this is to say that Crowley, in his two months in New Orleans, would have been well placed to investigate. He certainly mixed with black inhabitants of the District. His diary tells us he employed a black maid, Georgie, and that he engaged black prostitutes.²² One, 'Sister Green', made such an impression on him that he included her in a list of his past lovers and featured her in his *Not the Life and Adventures of Sir Roger Bloxam*.²³ But for all this easy access, he apparently pursued no researches, sought out no experiences.

At this very time an acquaintance of his was also in the city and was doing exactly that. The German occultist writer Hanns Heinz Ewers knew Crowley by virtue of their both being contributors to *The*

Fig. 3. 'The Author under Protection of Machete and Flag,' from William Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929.

International. Ewers had apparently previously spent time in Haiti 'investigating voodoo and the methods of Haitian sorcerers' and was now in New Orleans to explore voodoo, supposedly robbing a grave for ritual purposes.²⁴ But Crowley made nothing of this.

A couple of years later, in autumn 1919, Crowley spent a week with William Seabrook, later famed for his books *The Magic Island*, on Haiti and its Vodou, and *Witchcraft: Its Power in the World Today*. However, Seabrook's visits to Haiti and Africa came much later, in the late 1920s; it may well be that in 1919 he knew as much (or as little) of Vodou as Crowley did. Certainly in both men's accounts of the week-long visit, there is no mention of their having discussed the subject. And nothing more for almost a decade.

The Voodoo Priestess Years, 1928–30

1 December 1928. In Crowley's diary we suddenly read: 'Voodoo-orgie. The most wonderful climax in years.'²⁵

In 1928 he was living in Paris, with his secretary Israel Regardie, his Cefalù period behind him. Sometime in early November he met the lady of the voodoo-orgie. Her name was Marie de Miramar. We don't know where they met, or who introduced them, but we do know that Crowley was instantly smitten. She was Latin American, dark and exotic, and Crowley was besotted. 'She is marvellous beyond words, but excites me too much, so that I cannot prolong.'²⁶

She was also magical: 'She has absolutely the right ideas of Magick and knows some Voodoo . . . We did proper ritual consecrations, and arranged for the next Work.'²⁷ The results of their workings were impressive, at least in Crowley's assessment: 'The Magical Phenomena in this apartment are now acute. Lights and shadows, dancing sparks, noises as of people walking about, a large dark ghost in the bedroom lobby, short attacks of rheumatism (to 3 of us) and a Nameless Fear which seized Regardie.'²⁸

People in Crowley's circle also found her exotic,

and erotic. People thought she was Cuban, or Nicaraguan Creole, though in reality she was European Nicaraguan, with an Italian father and French mother.²⁹ Jack Lindsay, a literary editor, remembers her with a kind of colonial superiority as 'a fairly well-blown woman, oozing a helpless sexuality'. A young Arthur Calder-Marshall visited her and Crowley when they lived in Kent a year later. He recalled that she struck him as

one of the most remarkable women that I have ever seen. She wore a black-and-white satin dress, which lubriciously emphasized the exuberance of her hips and bust. Its singular *chic* brought into the living room of that furnished cottage during the off-season the brilliance of Rio de Janeiro in the sunlight, the colour and *ton* of the Avenida Rio Branco or the Rua do Ovidor in the high season . . . Even in Brazil she would have seemed exotic, but in Knockholt in December she was fantastic.³⁰

Integral to Marie's glamour were her notional voodoo associations. She claimed that in her youth in Nicaragua she had summoned the Devil. She said she'd done it on four occasions, and the technique centred on her dancing around a fire. Telling this to Crowley's friends shortly after their first meeting, she got them excited enough by the idea that they put on a rite to replicate the feat. Gerald Yorke and Israel Regardie set it up in Crowley's Paris apartment in early 1929. Crowley was not present.

They put on magical robes, cleared the furniture out of the way, stirred up the coal fire, drew a magic circle on the floor, lit the Abra-Melin incense, turned out the light. They began with the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram; then the Serpent [Regardie] and V.I. [Yorke] seated themselves in an easy yoga position and, following the magick of the Beast, began to chant the verses from the stele of Ankh-f-n-Khonsu. Maria, whom Brother V.I. described as big and cumbersome, began to dance. She approached the fire and made passes with hands and bare feet over and amid the

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flames. The room was cloudy with incense and coal smoke. Suddenly, while the Serpent and V.I. were still chanting the Egyptian mantra, Maria let forth a cry and fell senseless to the floor. V.I. had felt a presence behind his right shoulder, a form or force outside the circle. This was confirmed by the Serpent; he, too, had sensed the being whom their ceremonial magic had evoked, and he indicated the spot exactly.³¹

Powerful stuff indeed. This is the most detailed account of one of Marie's rituals, and it clearly was effective for the participants. If we are looking at tradition, however, it has to be said that this is scarcely voodoo. The framing – the circle, the Banishing Ritual, the Egyptian recitation – is entirely Thelemic.

Marie's contribution, the rite's central ecstatic trance dancing, is admittedly a feature of African diaspora religions. Did she see such activities in her native Nicaragua, and could she have been trained in voodoo there? Logic suggests that Marie's familiarity was superficial. In Nicaragua there was voodoo, loosely defined, but it was among the Garifuna on the eastern 'Mosquito' Coast, and European-descended Nicaraguans (like Marie's family) lived in the south-west of the country and had little to do with such peoples. Her love letters to Crowley indicate no knowledge of or connection to African diaspora traditions, and other than that, the record is silent.

In March 1929 the French authorities revoked Crowley's, Israel Regardie's and Marie de Miramar's residence permits and they had to leave France. Marie and Regardie took a boat to England but were refused entry, so the two sailed on to Brussels together, where, according to Gerald Suster, Marie seduced the young Regardie. In old age, he would cite her as one of the four most influential people on his life.³² Marie's significance to Regardie may have been on account of her being his first lover, but it equally may have been because of her aid on his magical path. His lifelong quest for esoteric knowledge was just commencing

at this time. Crowley, Yorke and Regardie all bore witness to Marie's evident capabilities. Perhaps she was, in this sense, a true 'High Priestess of Voodoo', for Regardie at least.

The Fall of the Voodoo Priestess

In Brussels in August 1929, Marie and Crowley were married. Richard Kaczynski argues this was a mere legal formality to allow Marie to take up residence in England, but Lawrence Sutin rightly contests this, noting the diary evidence that on the very night Crowley arrived in Brussels, the two engaged in sexual magic for the purposes of 'success to our campaign & happiness in marriage'. Sexual workings towards that aim continued over the next two months.³³ In the autumn they successfully moved to England, to a cottage in Kent. Problems arose quickly and Regardie recalled 'the most godawful rows'.³⁴ Marie suffered from ill health, and was attended to by a nurse. Crowley claimed she drank heavily and had delusions: 'M. had a quite bad attack of insane temper . . . She makes imbecile accusations about Nurse Walsh – that I am making love to her & – sometimes – that we are trying to poison her – she "has witnesses"'.³⁵

Given Crowley's philandering habits, Marie's fears regarding the seduction may not have been unfounded, and one has to ask if the poison fears might relate to attempts to sedate her, or even to Crowley's own drug use. Perhaps he was encouraging Marie to share his narcotic use in magic, as he had done with former Scarlet Women Roddie Minor and Leah Hirsig, both of whom had acted as Crowley's seers, or sryers. Or was he really trying to poison her? On 5 December 1929, Crowley wrote to his chemist asking for '1 bottle Uriciden (Strosheim)' and '1 bottle Quinine, Arsenic, & Strychnine Tablets (Burroughs)'.³⁶ Arsenic and strychnine were both used as stimulants by Victorian gentlemen, but the question of a more sinister reason does hang.

In April 1930 the couple visited Berlin. Four months later Crowley returned there, alone, to

Fig. 4. Aleister Crowley, *Marie de Miramar*. YORKE COLLECTION, WARBURG INSTITUTE.

arrange an art exhibition, and he took up with a woman he met on the first visit, Hanni Jaeger. It was over with Marie. He wrote to her in September: 'I gave you a great chance in life, and you threw it away. Tant pis! . . . It will be no good asking for alimony because we are all in the soup together'.³⁷

Crowley's close friend and financial manager Gerald Yorke acted as a go-between for him and Marie in the drawn-out, painful aftermath. From Buckland Crescent in Hampstead, a broke and ill Marie wrote:

Dear Yorke,

Will you send me £10-0-0? I must pay the rent for my flat on Saturday. I pay only for the flat £7-0.0. I enclose a letter from France, which I want you to read and show it to my husband, it is very important as it is about my daughter Lulu – Every day I am making progress with my English. I have been working very hard and I am not feeling at all well. The Doctor is coming to see me twice this week.³⁸

Yorke was dismayed by Crowley's treatment of Marie. He assisted her financially himself, hoping she might get back on her feet: in Paris, before meeting Crowley she had earned her living by painting and embroidery. He made repeated and unsuccessful attempts to get Crowley to face up to his responsibilities:

I gave Marie dinner the other night and found her in a very bad way. Rent is paid up till the end of the month, but she is very short of food, & in a bad nervous condition, talking to everyone of suicide. Her previous attempts to find work have met with very little success. She got one regular job, but lost it through being your wife when John Bull attacked you & the Mandrake early in January. She cannot return *status quo ante* until she has got her divorce.

On paper you seem willing to help her. But in practise you spend the whole of what you have on yourself.³⁹

Marie was indeed in a bad way, and, realising that her marriage was at an end, began to enquire about divorce proceedings. To Yorke she reported:

This morning I have been to see the Magistrate, and he said that he will first know what Crowley answer to you. Let me know at once his answer; will you? He suggested me to take a Solicitor, but when you have the letter from A.C.

He took his address from Berlin. Now I will write to Colonel Carter too.

Please to not forget to let me know what he answers to you. This is my last hope of life.⁴⁰

Yorke pleaded with Crowley:

Do face the position & come out into the open. Either write her that you do not intend to let her have a penny, or else state what allowance you are prepared to make her . . .

Please do not forget that if you persist in giving her nothing at all, you run the risk eventually of going to prison for it.

Do have the decency to 'come clean' & put the wretched woman out of her suspense either by writing & telling her to go to hell, or else by sending money. To write & say you want to & then to send nothing – which is what you have done since Oct 25th – is distinctly mean, to put it mildly.⁴¹

Despite Yorke's entreaties, Crowley refused. He had neither time, money nor sympathy for Marie. Due to her mental condition, Marie was unable to secure further employment. In May 1931 she was given temporary refuge in the home of a Mr Maruk, a waiter she knew, and his wife in Lower Marsh, Waterloo. A month later she was in a Wandsworth workhouse, the Swaffield Road Institution. Just one month after that she was committed to Colney Hatch Mental Hospital in Friern Barnet. Her medical report from there makes sad reading.

Unfortunately her earlier phantasy formation

has resulted in definite delusions, and she now believes she is the daughter of the King and Queen and of pure English blood; also that she married the Prince of Wales twelve years ago, though he is ignorant of the blood relationship. At present her conduct is satisfactory but she is resentful that her claims are not acknowledged and is likely to become difficult.⁴²

Gerald Yorke visited her at Colney Hatch. The doctors told him of this delusion, and another one: that she was married to The Great Beast 666, Aleister Crowley, the Wickedest Man in the World. Yorke put the record straight on that particular score. She was in fact still his wife, as no divorce had been settled.

So appalled was Yorke by Crowley's behaviour towards his wife that a rift developed between the two men. Crowley dismissed Yorke as his financial administrator and sued him, albeit unsuccessfully. Yorke's disenchantment led to his departure for China to study Buddhism. Finally in July 1932, Crowley visited Marie in Colney Hatch – not to help her, but rather to get her to sign a document agreeing to a divorce while at the same time giving up all claims for financial support. She did not. Crowley reported that one of her doctors 'advised me to leave Marie severely alone. He agreed that the case is hopeless.'⁴³

Marie de Miramar remained an inmate of Colney Hatch, certified insane, case number 23112, until her death in July 1955. During all these years she remained legally married to Crowley, who feared that a divorce would make him liable for her financial upkeep. She was given a pauper's burial in St Pancras & Islington Cemetery, East Finchley, a lonely end for the High Priestess of Voodoo.

The Thirties

Marie de Miramar passed from Crowley's life in 1930, though her tragic end came only twenty-five years after. His two years with her did not lead him to any deeper enthusiasm for Afro-Caribbean traditions as he went through his next decade. In the thirties the

occultist Rollo Ahmed was in his circle of friends around London.⁴⁴ Ahmed had a Caribbean mother and had lived variously in Yucatán, Brazil, Guyana and Burma and wherever he lived, he studied the local magical practices. He wrote *The Black Art*, published in 1936, an overview of magic from prehistoric times to the twentieth century; it includes a section on voodoo and obeah. There is no suggestion in any surviving diary, letter or account that Ahmed and Crowley even discussed Afro-Caribbean magic together. If they did, it seems to have had no impact on the written work of either of them.

Crowley might have done well to share with Ahmed his copy of *Obeah Simplified*. Ahmed's was a peculiarly unenlightened view: 'Voodooism is Devil worship pure and simple', for example, and 'Sometimes these dances were in honour of the moon as representing the "Old Master" or Devil'.⁴⁵ Crowley wrote with more sensitivity than this on such traditions, even though his were just brief remarks.

We can only speculate on why. One reason may be the secrecy surrounding these traditions, and the

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Fig. 5. Rollo Ahmed, from *The Black Art*, Jarrolds, 1968. Photographer unknown.

difficulties a wealthy white Englishman would face in approaching black working-class groups. Another possibility is that Crowley did not see value in these traditions. His racial attitudes were contradictory. On the one hand, his writings frequently display bigoted remarks and he speaks of 'niggers' with a casual insensitivity. Yet he was interested in magical culture worldwide and spent time with people of all races, as his travel diaries attest. He held progressive views on the racism he found in the United States: 'The hatred of the Yankee and his fear of the Negro are as great as ever. In the latter case it has increased. The recent revival and the nation-wide spread of the Ku-Klux-Klan is one of the most sinister symptoms of recent years.'⁴⁶

Over the course of his life, Crowley showed a respect for African-based magic, though he never pursued it. It may well have started when he was a young man, perhaps as early as the 1890s, with the little Theosophical booklet *Obeah Simplified*, which was so adamant that obeah was a magic both honourable and effective. In New Orleans, he relished the bohemian and multi-ethnic atmosphere of the voodoo-centred District. In middle age he was transfixed by Marie de Miramar's Central American magical heritage, appointing her the one and only voodoo Scarlet Woman. But it only touched the surface of his lived experience and seems peripheral to his main areas of experiment and research. And yet in a small but powerful dose the African current found its way into Thelema. With 'obeah and wanga' in the text of *The Book of the Law*, it sits in a sacred text of modern magic, an encoded power reaching across culture and race.

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NOTES

- 1 Crowley, *Book of the Law*, book 1, line 37.
- 2 Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, pp. 150–1.
- 3 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, pp. 1–2.
- 4 Bell, *Obeah*, p. 6.
- 5 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, p. i.
- 6 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, p. 31.
- 7 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, p. 16.
- 8 St John, *Hayti*, p. 225.
- 9 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, pp. 28–9.
- 10 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, pp. 33–4.
- 11 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, p. 31.
- 12 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, pp. 57–9.
- 13 Korahon, 'Obeah!', pp. 310, 316; 'Occultism in Modern Literature', part 5, p. 217.
- 14 Personal communication, Clive Harper, 21 July 2011.
- 15 Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, ch. 9.
- 16 Cassecanarie, *Obeah Simplified*, pp. 74–5.
- 17 Crowley, 'New and Old Commentaries'.
- 18 Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, 'Introduction'.
- 19 Crowley, 'Temple of Solomon the King', p. 389.
- 20 Crowley, 'New and Old Commentaries'.
- 21 Crowley, *Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, pp. 817–18. On the District: Rose, *Storyville*. On neighbouring areas: Stephen Grasso, personal communication, 2012.
- 22 Yorke Collection: N.S. 19, 15 December 1916; O.S. A1, various dates 1916–17.
- 23 Yorke Collection: O.S. EE2, 145.
- 24 Spence, *Secret Agent 666*, p. 142.
- 25 Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, p. 310.
- 26 Yorke Collection: Diary, 19 November 1928.
- 27 Crowley, Diary 1928, 14 November.
- 28 Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, p. 434.
- 29 Yorke Collection: O.S. E1, 1 (e).
- 30 Calder-Marshall, *Magic of My Youth*, pp. 187–8.
- 31 Symonds, *The Great Beast*, pp. 427–8.
- 32 Suster, *Crowley's Apprentice*, pp. 38, 173.
- 33 Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, p. 440; Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, p. 342, citing Yorke Collection: Diary, 17 April 1929.

- 34 Suster, *Crowley's Apprentice*, p. 38.
- 35 Yorke Collection: Diary, 8 October 1929.
- 36 Yorke Collection: AC letter to Pope Roach, 5 December 1929.
- 37 Yorke Collection: AC letter to MdM, September 1930.
- 38 Yorke Collection: MdM to GY, 4 September 1930, O.S.D4 34.
- 39 Yorke Collection: GY to AC, 20 February 1931, O.S.D4 38-43.
- 40 Yorke Collection: MdM to GY, 19 February 1931, O.S.D4 36.
- 41 Yorke Collection: GY to AC, 20 February 1931, O.S.D4 38-43.
- 42 Yorke Collection: Medical Superintendent of Colney Hatch Mental Hospital, letter to AC, 1 August 1931.
- 43 Yorke Collection: Diary, 5 July 1932.
- 44 Burnett-Rae, *Aleister Crowley*; Baker, *Devil Is a Gentleman*.
- 45 Ahmed, *The Black Art*, pp. 198, 199.
- 46 Crowley, *Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, p. 794.

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